

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Are we zeroed out?

Speaker 2: Yes, sir. We're recording.

Speaker 1: Do you remember if ... In the eastern part of the state the storm hit on the day after New Year's. That was a Sunday, January 2nd. Do you recall if it hit here at that same time?

Speaker 3: No, I don't. I'd been going to the University of Wyoming, and I came home for Christmas. It started snowing. But it seems to me like the wind hadn't started yet, and that's what was really bad. Dad had bought a new truck, and they were looking for - It was starting to get bad here in Rawlins, and they were looking for people to haul feed and things. We didn't need the truck, and I could see I wasn't going back to college. I brought the truck in here to Rawlins. My 2 uncles were working for a local feed store, and so he put me to work hauling for him, just hauling. That's when it started getting bad, but I can't remember the days or dates. I don't really remember. But it was, you're right, it was New Year's or shortly after anyway. The wind started blowing here and really starting to cause problems. In fact, the roads were getting covered up and everything.

Then I, first on a Sunday I took a load of feed to Wamsutter, which is 40 miles west. Took it out there and unloaded and started back. I was going to make a detour and go to Baggs and visit some friends down there. I never got to Crystal Junction. It was blowing, and I said, "Uh uh, I'm going back." [00:02:00] So I turned around and went back to Wamsutter. I got in there, and fortunately they had a nice little hotel. Got a room.

I knew there was a person, Shorty Terrell. He was the foreman for a sheep outfit. He then, it blew in so bad that nobody could get to Rawlins. It closed the freeway. Wamsutter was a turnaround for PIE trucks. They had a bunch of them sitting there. Anyhow, Shorty Terrell started ramrodding things. I had my truck. It was Bob Daily, he had his uncle's truck there. Shorty Terrell had his truck, young fella driving it. There was the fellow that owned the hotel, he had a truck. There was a couple of young fellas name of Hayes, and they had a couple of trucks there. But we were snowed in as far as coming east. You could get west, but we couldn't get east.

Fortunately, they pulled a trainload of hay in there from Oregon a few days before. A couple, I don't know how long before that. The sheep men here in Rawlins that had sheep out there would call Shorty and tell him where they

needed the feed. So we'd load up the trucks and had 2 Caterpillars there. One was BLM and one was the army. They had 2 young army guys on that, and a BLM guy. They'd go out there and we'd follow them to wherever it was to get to the sheep. But the wind was blowing severely. So when we'd turn around to come back, the snow had drifted in so bad that the Cats couldn't hardly push it out, so they'd make a new track. [00:04:00] We'd follow them back into Wamsutter. Fortunately, they had a little café there, so we had a place to eat. Fortunately, they had a bar also. I'd just turned 21, which was unfortunate. But, I didn't ...

Speaker 1: I think you had mentioned before that they had to dig the new track because for some reason when the snow drifted back in to the old track that you had going out, it was harder to get that ...

Speaker 3: Oh, yeah. It was slower. They could have done it, but it was slower pushing the snow, because it was so hard that they'd just make a new track and go out. Luckily they had this little café and they had plenty of food, because they'd bring it in from Rock Springs. As I say about this PIE company, they had trucks there. They had, I think it was 6 tractors. They had them parked up on the highway, because they weren't using the highway. It was about a quarter of a mile, half mile up there. So the guy would come out from Rock Springs, and he'd drive the trucks down here and fuel them up, drive them back up there. They set there and idled for 2 weeks. They didn't shut them off. It was too cold and things.

Funny thing about this little restaurant. I was sitting there, and there was a big old mound of snow right in front of it. We had to keep going around it to get in. I says, "We've got these Cats here. Why don't we push that out of the way?" They said, "Well, there's a tank truck under it." He was completely buried. You couldn't even see it.

I was there almost 2 weeks. Fortunately, I went out, I didn't have anything but the clothes I had on. But Ferguson Mercantile here in Rawlins had a satellite store there. So I could buy clothes and toiletries and stuff, and things, so that worked out pretty well. It was a really nice little hotel. They really took good care of us and everything. [00:06:00] I was there for ... 2 weeks, I'm sure it was. I think that's what it was, 2 week.

Speaker 1: So you were heading out to the sheep kind of out towards the Red Desert area?

Speaker 3: We went, yes, north of Wamsutter out on the Red Desert to Chena Lakes and Lost Lake. I couldn't tell you who the sheep belonged to, but it was P.E. Daily owned some of them. Then Rasmussen owned some, Hardy Rasmussen. That's who Shorty Terrell worked for was Hardy Rasmussen. He was his foreman. But there were ... I don't know how many trips we made, but we made 1 every day, out there somewhere.

Speaker 1: Were you going out in the midst of the storm sometimes?

Speaker 3: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We went out. You couldn't hardly see where we were going. But they ... It worked all right. The Cats knew pretty well where they were going. Yeah, then like I said, it'd blow in coming back. The 1 trip we made north of Wamsutter to Chena Lakes, I think it was. We left early in the morning. The sun was going down as we were coming back, and we were still 4 or 5 miles from Wamsutter. Some of the trucks were getting low on fuel. The people in Wamsutter, some of them got a little concerned, so then there was ... We met a couple of trucks coming out to meet us to make sure we had enough fuel and everything to get back in.

On that trip, I think it was the army Cat quit, had trouble with it. So the BLM Cat skinner, he got on it. He was [00:08:00] really something to watch. He'd run that Cat, and he could really push a lot of snow. He really knew what he was doing. The army kids were a little green. They wasn't really sure what was happening. But BLM guy, he'd come in in the evening and have his dinner and go to the bar. He was there till it closed. But he was there the next morning bright and early, going again out there. There were no cabs or anything on these Cats. They were just out there in the weather. They were tough.

It was quite an experience for me, at my age and everything, to be out there. Because that was the storm of the century, of course, as we know. I finally made it back in to Rawlins, and I stayed here for a while and worked out of here still hauling feed, because they still had a lot of people that needed feed. But they did have the roads open to where you could get out of town. I went as far as Baggs and north on to Sweetwater. We hauled a lot of hay out of Laramie, and Medicine Bow. Then the 3 of us took our trucks and we went to Pinedale. We went up there and we hauled it out of the field into town. So then they'd put it on the big semis and haul it there, because they couldn't get out. Semis couldn't get out there in the snow. I stayed here probably a good 30 days or so.

Speaker 1: When you were out to Wamsutter and couldn't get back home, were you able to get in touch with your parents?

Speaker 3: No. No. No way. Because we didn't have a phone. There was no phone at that time there. The mail couldn't get through. So they didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't know what they were doing. But then they finally opened the road through to Landers [00:10:00] where the mail went. Then we were in touch then. Then I went out soon as the roads opened to make sure they were doing all right. And they did. It wasn't easy, but it was okay. They got through it fine.

But there were ... and I think we talked before about the antelope, that so many of them ...

- Speaker 1: [inaudible 00:10:26]
- Speaker 3: Because the antelope normally don't jump a fence. They go under. They'd get out there and the snow was deep enough they couldn't get under. Some of them went over, walked over in some places. But others they'd drifted into corners, and just no place to go for them. They got covered up. Smothered a lot of them. I never saw any deer. They were up in the mountains, I guess. I don't know how that affected them.
- Speaker 1: The deer had a tough time, too. I was talking to a Game and Fish guy the other day in Cheyenne. He was telling me that the Red Desert herd was all but wiped out by the blizzard. But not so much by starvation and deep snow. He said they'd come down to the clearing at the railroad tracks, because they cleared the tracks out.
- Speaker 3: Oh, yeah.
- Speaker 1: And Highway 30. He said so many antelope got hit by trains.
- Speaker 3: I don't doubt it, yeah. I don't remember that they did. It was interesting. As I say, I was raised out there on the Sweetwater River, on Green Mountain. At that time there were no elk there. There had been. We'd find horns once in a while. But there were no elk. On the Red Desert, I fell over it horseback and things, and I don't ever remember seeing elk out there. But they're quite prevalent there now. So at that time when this storm hit, the elk weren't there, so I don't think it bothered them any.
- Speaker 1: Yeah, [00:12:00] the Fish and Game guy said that the elk weathered it okay. But the antelope and deer were tough. And the pheasants were tough too.
- Speaker 3: I know they lost a lot of deer down around Baggs. They had a quite a herd of deer in that area, and they lost quite a bit of them down there.
- Speaker 1: Are they white tail out here or mulies?
- Speaker 3: They're mulies, yeah. Back then, there were lots of antelope. Lots of antelope. I know there north on high country, there was an awful lot of big herds of them. They'd herd up in the wintertime. You'd see maybe 2,000 of them in a herd. But they don't seem to do that as much anymore. Of course, there isn't that many anymore. They're getting pretty scarce.
- Speaker 1: Do you recall a story of sheep herder running out of food and being in trouble out by the Red Desert area, and a Sherman tank went out to get him?

- Speaker 3: No, I don't. I don't recall. Only army equipment I recall was the Caterpillars, and trucks. They had some trucks, of course, yes, but they weren't ... They were the regular army, what do they call them? I can't remember now. They weren't big enough to haul feed or anything. Just personnel trucks. Then the army, or I think it was the army, had some air support in. They had some big planes hauling feed or hay out. Most of them, I think, went north. There wasn't any of them west. We never saw any planes out west at all.
- Speaker 1: Well, the worst of it, I think, was from the Continental Divide east. That kind of [00:14:00] fits with your story of being out to Wamsutter, and then you get to Rock Springs.
- Speaker 3: Rock Springs. I didn't go to Rock Springs. I don't know what the road was like. But this guy would come out there all the time. Then I think somebody would go in there and get some stuff for the restaurant so that it was all right. There was a young fellow that his parents owned the hotel that he worked in in Rock Springs. He'd come out 2 or 3 times. They had school there and had a couple of school teachers. They stayed right there. So they had school. But it was quite an experience.
- Speaker 1: How big were some of the drifts that you saw during that storm? Can you give me a sense? I know that truck was ... that tanker was filled to the top. Fifteen feet?
- Speaker 3: No. The drifts that we experienced out there really weren't that big. They did here farther east seem like they had more ... Like on the railroad, and then around here in Rawlins, I know after I came back in, they were pretty high, some of them, especially out north on the north highway. But really, between here and Wamsutter, I don't recall that the drifts were very high. In other words, they were what a snow plow could do. They didn't have a rotary here or anything to any problem with it. The drifts out there, and that country being flat and everything, it really didn't drift up too bad.
- Speaker 1: But the winds and the driven snow were horrible.
- Speaker 3: That was it, yeah. That wind never quit. You'd [00:16:00] make a track and come back, and it was all covered up.
- Speaker 1: And the snow was kind of really dry and crystalline almost?
- Speaker 3: Yes, it was. But it would really pack. It'd pack in so hard that a horse could walk over it. It was that tough. But the Cats could get around all right, but they didn't go in high gear. They had to push a lot of snow, bust the brush and stuff, because

we weren't on any roads. We were just out in the brush, sagebrush, greasewood and that kind of thing.

Speaker 1: Just kind of picking your way to your destination.

Speaker 3: Yeah, that's right. I imagine the roads, you can still see where we went on some of them out there probably. I don't know.

Speaker 1: So you come back from Wamsutter. You come in to Rawlins. Has the city changed? Is there a lot of snow in Rawlins?

Speaker 3: Yes, there was. There was a lot of snow here. They were working on it to get it cleared out. By that time, they pretty much had. The trains were running. Some of the cuts were ... you could see a lot of snow in them. But pretty much here in town, it wasn't gone, but it wasn't as severe as it had been by the time got back.

Speaker 1: Then on the way to Hanna and Medicine Bow and Laramie, it was pretty much plowed out, but there were big cuts on the side of the road.

Speaker 3: Yeah, you could get down there. It was pretty clear. The roads were clear. By that time, I don't say the wind had gone down, but the snow had pretty well quit snowing, of course. There was just blowing and things. It took about 30 days for it to really, people could get around and get in. I don't know how long [00:18:00] it was before the folks could get out of the ranch to the highway, but it was probably a month, something like that, before they could break out there.

Speaker 1: And your folks did okay? They had plenty of provisions of sort?

Speaker 3: Yes, they did.

Speaker 1: Did your mom can?

Speaker 3: Oh, you bet. She did lots of canning. We had sheep as well as cows. So we had a pretty good supply of groceries for our herders. So we still had a lot of that on hand. We were thankful that we'd sold the sheep, because I don't know how they'd have got by. We'd have probably lost most of them, because we didn't have the equipment, really, to fight the snow, that you needed to, to get around. But they did, they survived it pretty well.

Speaker 1: So your dad sold the sheep, but he still had cattle, and they made it through okay?

Speaker 3: Yeah, we had cows. But in the spring we sold those. We gave up on the ranching. It was just kind of broke their heart a little bit, and so they sold out later in that spring.

Speaker 1: You think the blizzard is what did it?

Speaker 3: It helped. They were, my folks, my dad was 50 years old. My mom was a little younger. It just got more than they could handle. I just, I never went back, except to help them get rid of things and get straightened out and things. We sold out that year. That was the end of it.

Speaker 1: In 1949?

Speaker 3: Yes, in 1949.

Speaker 1: Speaking of spring, do you recall if the spring, was it an especially green one, or a muddy one?

Speaker 3: No, I don't. It seems like it was [00:20:00] a good, green spring. I don't think there was any excessive moisture. From then on, there wasn't much snow. That kind of did it in. That was the end of it. Because then I stayed in here, and I did ... Just kept my truck, and I made 1 trip to Canada. My uncle was working for a trucking company here in town that moved oil rigs and things. They were going to Canada, and they needed 1 more truck to haul a big old tank on. So they asked me, "Do you want to go?" And I said, "Sure, I want to go." So I went to Canada. That kind of ended the trucking there.

Speaker 1: You've seen a lot of winters since '49. Do any of them stack up to the severity of that winter?

Speaker 3: No. There was 1 in, seems like '50- ... Well, after the folks sold the ranch they went to Baggs and bought a bar and a hotel. The hotel, mom would send the linen in here to Rawlins to be laundered. In the winter, I don't recall the day, year exactly, but it was either '54 or '55, in there somewhere, it snowed up pretty bad, and the road was closed, and they had quite a time getting it open. But that was by far ... '49 was the worst, and I haven't seen one or heard one any worse since then. But there was 1 that year that was pretty bad.

Speaker 1: But '49 was the hump year?

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. And '49 was again primarily wind. [00:22:00] There was snow, too, but the wind just stacked it all up. So that was primarily, at least in my opinion, it was just ... Because I don't recall it snowing steadily very long or

anything after that. But I think '55, I think was the other one that did bother the ranchers and everybody a little bit.

Speaker 1: That's about all I've got, unless you can think of anything else you'd like to add.

Speaker 3: No. I don't know any good stories or any jokes, or anything. Clean ones, that is, anyway.

Speaker 1: We can cut then, Kyle. I've got a joke for you, then.